

## Tar Heels help pull Moldovans from Soviet rule

By **MARK GILCHRIST**  
Special to the News Reporter

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, millions of people were thrown into the free world, down a wide-open, winding road with its share of hazards.

About 3 million of those people live in the small Eastern European country of Moldova. With a climate, population and agricultural base similar to North Carolina, it's not surprising that Moldovans and Tar Heels have developed such a close and productive relationship.

Moldova is in the upper 40s latitude, about the same as Minnesota, but with a milder climate. The terrain is filled with rolling hills, farmland and forests, with rivers separating its borders from Romania to the west, and Ukraine to the east.

Close to the Black Sea, Moldova became a landlocked country during the Soviet breakup, when a 40-mile-wide swath of land along the coast was given to Ukraine. Moldova has a single small port on the Danube River.

Adding to the confusion of this burgeoning country is a region along its eastern border that behaves like a nation of its own. Transnistria is considered to be an "autonomous territorial unit with special legal status" by Moldova, but it is not recognized by any United Nations country.

Mix in the fact that, throughout the country, Moldovans speak at least two languages, Romanian and Russian, and one can begin to understand the great challenges they face.

When Moldova emerged from the Soviet Bloc in 1991, it began a massive undertaking to privatize commerce, bank-

ing and land ownership, and build a democratic republic based on the rule of law, with a free-market economy more conducive to Western markets.

Bullish on international commerce because of its location between the large markets of Europe and Asia, Moldova has made tremendous progress by making alliances, including joining the United Nations, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

The Gross Domestic Product in 2013 was \$2,239 per Moldovan, about 4 percent compared to the U.S. or England, a situation that puts many Moldovans in the disruptive position of traveling abroad (mostly to Russia and Europe) to work for much higher wages and send "remittances" home to their families. These payments amounted to 24 percent of the country's GDP in 2013.

The country needed a complete overhaul, not only in ways and means, but in personal outlook. After decades of the government owning everything and supplying every person with jobs, housing and healthcare, every person now has the opportunity to choose all that themselves, but they also have the persistent challenge of obtaining all of that themselves.

### The N.C. Guard

The country also lacked basic infrastructure, so when the N.C. Army National Guard was teamed with Moldova in 1996, it had plenty of opportunities to help. This alignment came from the U.S. Army's National Guard State Partnership program, that followed the NATO Partnership for Peace.

The worldwide program had originated in the Baltic Region as "a key U.S. security cooperation tool," according to NCARNG media relations officer Capt. Matthew Boyle, "fa-

cilitating cooperation across all aspects of international civil-military affairs and encouraging people-to-people ties at the state level."

North Carolina military personnel have trained Moldovan military and police on anti-terrorism, cyber defense, minesweeping, emergency medicine, and other disciplines, not only in Moldova, but also in Kosovo and Iraq.

Guardsmen and women have engaged in nearly 300 events with Moldovans since 1996 and are planning more than two dozen for 2016. This training has helped Moldova reach an important NATO certification.

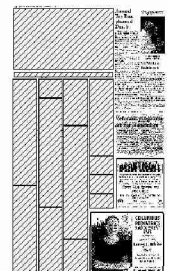
The N.C. Guard in 2008 also partnered with Botswana and has helped the African nation; "develop their non-commissioned officer corps, improve their anti-poaching capability and develop their emergency response capability, to name a few examples," Boyle stated.

### N.C. joins in

North Carolina formed an alliance with Moldova in 1999, to help the country with its civil emergency operations and to expand its markets for goods. The state has worked with its public and private universities, the Guard, and other organizations to provide Moldovans with training, expertise and donations of goods.

North Carolinians and the Guard have built playgrounds and a medical clinic, have trained nurses and medical staff, and have provided dental services and immunizations to nearly 25,000 Moldovan children.

Several N.C. organizations and the Guard have donated medical equipment and supplies, well pumps, books, clothing, mine detecting equipment and computers worth more



than \$1 million.

North Carolina has hosted more than 250 Moldovan farmers who have interests in production technology, business management, cooperatives and marketing. The state extension service has sent representatives to Moldova several times to advise and educate farmers. The state has worked with Engineers Without Borders and the Peace Corps to improve water and sanitation conditions.

From 1997 to 2005, Southeastern Community College hosted about 230 Moldovans for extended educational visits, provided internships in business, agriculture, public health, and nongovernmental organizations, and sent experts to Moldova for advisement.

The state also facilitated many cultural, scientific and academic exchanges and bolstered the coordination of humanitarian efforts of many N.C. and U.S. organizations for Moldova.

North Carolinians have adopted Moldovan children and have hosted Moldovan students for internships in offices throughout the state government.

In 2000, the City of Greensboro formed a sister-city partnership with Buiucani, a section of the capitol city of Chisinau, and Winston-Salem partnered with Ungheni, along the Prut River and the border with Romania.

A Chapel Hill nonprofit, VIF Global International Education, offers online education assistance for teachers in more than 60 countries, a service they donate in Moldova. They also work with the N.C. Sec. of State to pair grade-school classrooms in North Carolina with similar classrooms in Moldova.

The N.C. National Guard Adjutant General, Greg Lusk, visited Moldova in July. Sec.

of State Elaine Marshall has visited 10 times, most recently in October to renew the state's partnership agreement. Hickory native William H. Moser served as the U.S. ambassador to Moldova from 2011 until this year.

## About the Peace Corps

In October, 1960, hours after debating Richard Nixon for the third time and flying from New York, Sen. John F. Kennedy gave an impromptu 2 a.m. campaign speech to 5,000 University of Michigan students, challenging them to spend two years helping people in developing countries.

Kennedy won the election and soon organized a Peace Corps pilot program. Americans submitted 11,000 applications in the next few months, and 51 volunteers went to Ghana that August. Congress approved the Peace Corps on September 22, 1961, to "promote world peace and friendship."

It might be cheaper and easier for the Peace Corps to house volunteers in apartments, but the main goal of volunteers is to integrate themselves into the community. The best way to do this is to live with a member of the community, so the staff goes to great lengths to locate families with extra rooms in safe environments.

Though volunteers are not paid, their expenses are taken care of, including health insurance and other benefits, and they are given a "readjustment allowance" for some savings when they return to the States.

Volunteers serve for two years, but first they spend an additional two months training. This is mostly language study, but includes extensive country-specific training in safety and health as well as in their program and projects. Each country has support staff for the volunteers, including medical, safety and language instruction.

The Peace Corps revised its volunteer application process dramatically last year to make it easier and faster to apply, and in turn received 70 percent more applications. It is still a rigorous process, with security, financial and medical background checks, but applicants can now select their destination country and their work program if they like.

Applicants must be U.S. citizens, and at least 18 years old – there is no upper age limit.

Volunteers are not just sent off to villages to fend for themselves and find things to do. More than half of the work is in structured programs of education, teaching either health subjects or English language. Depending on the country, volunteers also work in small business, community, or youth development or in agriculture.

A fairly new program, Peace Corps Response, enlists experienced professionals to serve for shorter periods to address specific needs in various countries. It was through this program that Peace Corps volunteers actually served in the United States, in the Gulf Region after Hurricane Katrina.

Today, the average age of the 6,818 volunteers serving in 64 countries is 28; two-thirds of them are women, 7 percent are older than 50, and 6 percent are married. Nearly half are serving in Africa, and nearly one-quarter in Latin America. Another quarter are serving in Eastern Europe or Asia, and the rest are in the Caribbean, the Middle East and the Pacific Islands.

In its 54-year history, nearly 2220,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 140 countries.

North Carolina can be proud of its international volunteer heritage. Four of the state's universities are listed as having the highest numbers of active Peace Corps

volunteers. UNC Chapel Hill has 39 alumni currently serving; Duke University has 16; UNC Wilmington has 14; and Wake Forest University has nine alumni volunteers.

In the five decades of the Peace Corps, 4,146 Tar Heels have volunteered to spend two years helping people around

the world. Of the 148 currently serving, five of them, Nhi Vu and Patrick Withrow of Charlotte, Zawadi Wainaina of Jacksonville, Bonnie England of Wrightsville Beach, and Mark Gilchrist of Whiteville, are proudly serving in Moldova, a country that, for nearly two decades, has enjoyed a

productive, caring and peaceful relationship with North Carolina.

Learn more about Moldova, the Peace Corps and the Moldova-Tarheel relationship, with website links, photos and more: [www.MarksTrail.com](http://www.MarksTrail.com)



**N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, left, renewed the state's unique partnership program with the Republic of Moldova earlier this month during a trip to the Eastern European country. Marshall shakes hands with Moldovan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Andrei Galbur, right, after the first signing, which was followed by one with the Moldovan Prime Minister Valeriu Strelet.**